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TARGETING DESTRUCTIVE NARCISSISM: A NEW

APPROACH FOR IDENTIFYING AND ELIMINATING TOXIC

SENIOR LEADERS IN THE U.S. AIR FORCE

by

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Biography

Mr. Attila Bognar is a student at the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. Mr. Bognar served as an U.S. Army officer for 22 years from platoon to echelons above corps as a signal and automation officer. Upon retirement in 2005, he became a senior manager for Dell Computers as well as a defense contractor. He returned to government service in 2007 as a senior information technology manager for the U.S. Army Human Resources Command. Responsible for the Army's first large-scale migration of personnel information systems and applications, the U.S. Army selected Mr. Bognar as the Army G-1 2011 Civilian Employee of the Year. Infotech also selected him as the 2012 Technology Leader of the Year. Subsequently, the Department of Defense selected Mr. Bognar to participate in the Defense Senior Leadership Development Program. Mr. Bognar is an ardent student of leadership. The U.S. Army's *Military Review* journal has published an article written by him entitled "Tales from Twelve O'Clock High: Leadership Lessons for the 21st Century."

Abstract

Air Force officers are under strict obligation to uphold the service's three core values of *Integrity First, Service before Self*, *and Excellence in All We Do*. While a majority of senior Air Force officers enforce the core values, there are some which threaten to imperil public confidence in the military as an institution. A senior leader's departure from the core values, including a breach of character, is likely indicative of toxicity within that officer. Inevitably, toxic leadership is deleterious to an organization, eroding unit cohesion and esprit de corps while destroying trust. One can trace the etiology of toxic leadership to individuals possessing destructive narcissistic behaviors. Narcissism, like toxic leadership, operates along a continuum. There appears to be both a correlative and causal relationship between more pathological manifestations of narcissism and malevolent toxic behaviors. There also appears to be a correlation between higher stress levels, narcissism and toxic leadership. Despite an increase in toxicity among senior officers, the Air Force remains mostly ambivalent towards dealing with the phenomenon. This paper offers provocative recommendations for combating toxicity, centered on the need for the Air Force to implement new officer personnel policies that impact recruitment, promotion and command selection methodologies. At the cornerstone of these policy recommendations, the paper advocates psychological testing of officer candidates during pre-accessioning and iterative testing for on-boarded officers that would identify toxic characteristics. Recommendations also include complementing psychological testing with other assessment tools to provide a holistic view of an officer's propensity for toxicity. Finally, the paper recommends that all officers, at various phases of their career, receive indoctrination in emotional intelligence awareness as a means to self-identify and correct narcissistic and toxic behaviors.

Introduction

Since 2005, Harvard's Center for Public Leadership has produced the National Leadership Index (NLI) which measures public confidence in 13 major sectors, including the military. Not only has military leadership consistently ranked number one during the eight year history of the NLI, but public confidence continued to increase to its highest levels in 2012 with the military being the only sector that has "shown more than moderate confidence in all those years."[1] These findings parallel a 2013 Gallup Poll measuring the confidence of Americans across 16 institutions where they also selected the military as their number one choice.[2] As the ultimate wingmen for professionalism and leadership within the service, Air Force officers have played a paramount role in creating this perception by Americans.

To sustain this public confidence, these officers are under strict obligation to uphold the service's three core values of *Integrity First, Service before Self*, and *Excellence in All We Do*. In the words of General Ryan: "From airman to four-star general . . . [these values] guide . . . our own conscience [and] remind us of what we expect from ourselves."[3] Since they have the capacity to directly influence a sizeable number of followers, Air Force senior leaders (i.e., colonels and general officers), particularly as commanders, act as the supreme vanguard for honoring the core values. While a majority of senior officers enforces these values, there are some which threaten to imperil public confidence in the Air Force as an institution. Unlike junior officers, senior leaders are more prone to succumb to Ludwig's and Longenecker's Bathsheba Syndrome−drifting from the core values as they lose strategic focus, abuse access to privileged information, misuse resources, and inflate their own beliefs to control outcomes.[4] As Padilla asserts, such pernicious behaviors are more likely to appear in senior jobs where there is little supervision.[5]

A senior leader's departure from the core values, including a breach of character, is likely indicative of toxicity within that officer.[6] Toxic leaders are those "who engage in numerous destructive behaviors and who exhibit certain dysfunctional personal characteristics . . . inflict[ing] . . . serious and enduring harm on their followers and organizations."[7] Within the Air Force, "toxic leaders work to promote themselves at the expense of their subordinates, and usually do so without considering long-term ramifications to their [followers], their unit, and the . . . profession."[8] Toxicity is most acute for senior officers serving as commanders as they pose a despotic and existential threat to the organization's livelihood and mission. In fact, Glad specifically equates toxic leadership to tyranny where the leader rules without law, seeks opportunities for his or her own advantage and uses extreme tactics within the organization.[9]

It appears the Air Force has a high tolerance for toxic leaders, with the literature review indicating parsimonious attention to this phenomenon by the service. Perhaps this is because most toxic leaders are top achievers with impressive performance records. Reed acknowledges toxic leaders are very responsive to missions from their superiors, even appearing obsequious to them.[10] Lipman-Bluman highlights that they charm superiors by capturing them with a noble vision while creating perceptions of comfort, order and certainty.[11] Moreover, Humphreys as well as Rosenthal and Pittinsky confirm toxic leaders generate strong self-confidence and charisma.[12] [13] However, Kets deVries cautions that these leaders generate only a temporary sense of excitement that followers soon see as opportunism.[14]

In reality, a toxic leader's positive effects are ephemeral and disingenuous. Inevitably, toxic leadership atrophies a unit, inducing "unnecessary organizational stress, negative values and hopelessness . . . [and weakening] . . . unit cohesion and esprit de corps"[15] while impacting Airmen "well-being, retention and mission accomplishment."[16] Lubit warns that toxic leaders

"divert people's energy from the real work of the organization,"[17] and Aubrey claims they "create . . . enduring harm to the organization's culture and climate.[18] In short, toxic behaviors foster serious side effects which are injurious to the organization.[19] As a result, it is clear that toxicity is in staunch diametric opposition to the Air Force core values.

Doty and Fenlason contend that narcissism is an innate component of the toxic leadership paradigm."[20] Narcissism is a set of behaviors in which an individual displays a pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy.[21] In many instances, narcissism is often the driving force behind the desire to obtain a leadership position.[22] Narcissistic behavior is dynamic, mercurial, and even paradoxical. For example, Mort and Rhodewalt found a narcissist may be both "socially facile while simultaneously insensitive to others' feelings"[23] while Pullen and Rhodes discovered that different personas of narcissism can materialize, including "the bully," "the star performer," the servant" and "the victim."[24] While there are benign aspects of narcissism, the manifestation of this behavior "[as a] dark-side personality characteristic" influences toxic behaviors that reduce the leader's effectiveness.[25]

Thesis

Influenced by destructive narcissistic behaviors, toxicity within the Air Force's senior leadership undermines the service's core values and threatens the integrity of the institution; invariably, the Air Force must target this debilitating phenomenon and implement officer personnel policies to identify and eliminate these dysfunctional leaders from its ranks.

Leadership and Narcissism

Kets deVries stresses that narcissistic behavior is a key ingredient for leadership success[26] and is a prerequisite for those aspiring to rise to the top.[27] Maccoby reinforces this assertion by declaring that history is replete with narcissists that have served to "inspire people and shape the future," with narcissism being "extraordinarily useful−even necessary" for successful leaders.[28] Particularly for organizations in crisis, narcissistic leaders can generate charismatic perceptions and serve as a transforming force.[29] [30] In addition, in its non-insidious form, narcissism can actually enhance perceptions of leader authenticity.[31] However, Brunell's et al. study shows that "narcissists have skills and qualities that are beneficial for becoming leaders but not necessarily beneficial for serving as effective leaders." [32] This suggests why many narcissistic leaders lose favor or take a fall over a period of time. Lastly, leadership behaviors within an individual are likely a reflection of that person's narcissistic tendencies.[33]

Clinical psychologists classify pathological narcissism as a mental illness known as Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). NPD exists in about 1% of the general population of which 50%-75% are male.[34] Diagnosis is categorical in nature−either an individual has NPD or does not.[35] Conversely, social psychologists see narcissism as being dimensional in nature. Leaders occupy various positions on a continuum ranging from healthy narcissism to pathology with the "factors that distinguish between health and dysfunction [being] the intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics of the leader."[36]

Nevertheless, there is growing conflation among the two schools of thought. The 2013 edition of the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)* recognizes this categorical and dimensional dichotomy and strikes a compromise. It retains the traditional categorical approach but also provides a hybrid

methodology for diagnosis which considers the dimensional nature of narcissism.[37]Simply put, even though a senior leader may not be pathologically narcissistic, he or she can still demonstrate malevolent narcissistic behaviors. Thus, it is important to note that whether an individual has a label of normal or abnormal, identical psychological processes apply.[38] Foster and Campbell specify that "non-disordered [i.e. non-pathological or normal narcissists] often exhibit cognitive/behavioral patterns similar to those with [clinically diagnosed] NPD."[39]

Along this continuum, Kets de Vries highlights three major narcissistic paradigms: constructive, reactive and self-deceptive. The constructive narcissist exhibits the salutary aspects of this phenomenon. Constructive narcissists are well-balanced, possess positive self-esteem, display empathy, have an aptitude for introspection and emit positive vitality.[40] In addition, they maintain a high-degree of self-confidence and are task-oriented. They take responsibility for their decisions, refusing to blame others when things go wrong.[41] Unquestionably, the preponderance of Air Force senior officers possesses these constructive and desirable narcissistic behaviors, enabling them to professionally execute their leadership responsibilities and faithfully guard the service's core values.

Reactive narcissists lie on the other end of the spectrum and possess destructive behaviors. "Reactive narcissists…often develop an exaggerated sense of self-importance and self-grandiosity and a concomitant need for admiration…they develop feelings of entitlement…believing that….rules and regulations do not apply to them…they lack empathy…[and] become fixated on issues of power, status, prestige, and superiority."[42] Furthermore, "they may also become "preoccupied by feelings of envy, spite, revenge, and/or vindictive triumph over others." [43] In this instantiation, narcissism becomes malignant,[44] forming a "Dark Triad" with pathology and Machiavellianism.[45] [46] [47]

Self-deceptive narcissists lie towards the middle of the continuum and are generally more amicable than the reactive variant. They tend to be less exploitative and can tolerate opposing views. They are more likely to be insecure and prefer not to make mistakes. Moreover, "they are not as quick to devalue others . . . and have an analytical orientation."[48] Depending upon the environment and prevailing circumstances, a malicious narcissist can move between reactive and self-deceptive states. [49] As a result, this paper categorizes both reactive and self-deceptive strains of narcissism as destructive in nature.

The Dimensionality of Toxic Leadership

Like narcissism, toxic leadership is largely dimensional and operates "across a broad spectrum of degrees, types, frequencies and consequences."[50] Williams identifies 18 different variants of toxic leaders, ranging from simple incompetence to undiminished evilness.[51] Although the Air Force has not conducted any extensive studies on toxic leadership, a two-year Army study provided the following data: 1) 83% of soldiers have encountered a toxic leader, 2) 20% of soldiers reported their supervisor was a toxic leader and 3) 8% - 12% of officers at the rank of colonel and above are highly toxic and require removal from service.[52] Another study cites that the other military services experience toxic leadership at comparable rates."[53]

This data also suggests that toxic leadership exists only among a minority of senior Air Force officers and that "bad leaders are fortunately the exception rather than the rule."[54] However, more concerning is that studies indicate senior officers experience less toxicity among each other, including having less variation in leadership style from their superiors.[55] Bullis and Reed believe there is a desensitization among senior officers to recognize toxicity or its effects and that "the higher they are in the system, the more damage they can do.[56] Ultimately, this

"homogenization effect" at senior levels means it is the followers of the toxic leader that bear the brunt of his or her destructive behaviors.

The Nexus between Destructive Narcissism and Toxic Leadership

By comparing the literature review on destructive narcissism and toxic leadership, it becomes clear that, at a minimum, there is prima facie evidence of not only a correlation between the two behaviors but an actual causal relationship. Definitions and descriptions of dark side narcissism and toxic leadership are interwoven, and at many times, interchangeable. Although not scientifically validated, it appears that increased levels of destructive narcissistic behaviors may lead to increased toxicity. As a result, one can trace the etiology of toxic leadership to individuals possessing destructive narcissistic behaviors. Based upon the literature review, this paper assumes the terms destructive and dysfunctional are synonymous terms with toxicity.

In examining the various aspects of toxic leaders, Bullis and Reed describe them as "destructive leaders . . . focused on visible short-term mission accomplishment. They provide superiors with impressive, articulate presentations and enthusiastic responses to missions. But, they are unconcerned about, or oblivious to, staff or troop morale and/or climate. They are seen by the majority of subordinates as arrogant, self-serving, inflexible, and petty."[57] Furthermore, Reed stipulates that "toxic leadership, like leadership in general, is more easily described than defined, but terms like self-aggrandizing, petty, abusive, indifferent to unit climate, and interpersonally malicious seem to capture the concept."[58]

Also, in determining a scale to measure leader toxicity, Schmidt developed five descriptive dimensions: 1) abusive supervision, 2) authoritative leadership, 3) narcissism, 4) self-promotion and 5) unpredictability.[59] Finally, Williams identified 18 dimensional personal

characteristics of toxic leaders along a spectrum: incompetence, malfunctioning, maladjusted, sense of inadequacy, malcontent, irresponsible, amoral, cowardice, insatiable ambition, egotism, arrogance, selfish values, avarice and greed, lack of integrity, deception, malevolent, malicious, and malfeasance.[60]

When one juxtaposes the definitions and descriptions of toxic leadership against those of the malignant forms of narcissism, their fungibility clearly demonstrates that they are virtually manifestations of the same phenomenon. For example, Raskin and Terry identify the following narcissistic behaviors: authority, self-sufficiency, superiority, exhibitionism, exploitative, vanity, and entitlement with the [destructive] narcissistic being aggressive, autocratic and distrustful.[61] Rosenthal and Pittinsky cite similar narcissistic behaviors centered on egomaniacal needs: arrogance, feelings of inferiority, insatiable need for recognition and superiority, hypersensitivity and anger, lack of empathy, amorality, irrationality and inflexibility, and paranoia.[62] [63]

Additionally, the APA identifies nine criteria associated with pathological narcissistic personality: grandiose sense of self-importance, preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success and/or power, belief in unique status, need for excessive admiration, unreasonable sense of entitlement, conscious exploitation of others, lack of empathy, envious of others, and arrogant behavior directed towards others.[64] As previously discussed, these pathological symptoms can manifest themselves at the sub-clinical level across a range of intensity.

Based upon the presented evidence, it appears that the more pathological expressions of narcissism convey the more extreme materializations of toxic leadership. This is highly consistent with the dimensional nature of both phenomena. These personality disorders [either clinical or sub-clinical] "are a source of a highly toxic and dysfunctional organizational behavior"[65] with reactive [i.e., destructive] narcissism being the most prominent feature in

dysfunctional leadership.[66] Perhaps Kets de Vries offers the most poignant summation of this nexus by declaring that "this Darth Vader aspect of [dysfunctional or toxic] leadership . . . thrives on narcissism."[67]

Impacts of Stress on Toxic Leadership and Destructive Narcissism

There also appears to be a correlation between toxic leadership, narcissism and stress. Workplace pressures can often induce stress in senior leaders which can invoke self-protective reactions. In turn, such responses can activate or aggravate apparently dormant or remissive dysfunctional behaviors.[68] Once launched, these dysfunctional behaviors, fueled by conflicts and emotions, feed destructive narcissistic tendencies.[69] In fact, studies have demonstrated that narcissists showed greater signs of stress than other people and "have a very low tolerance for stress in performance situations" [and that] they [direct stress] at other individuals rather than themselves.[70] This leads to a conclusion that senior leaders operating in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environments may unwittingly unleash destructive narcissistic behaviors within themselves that translate into the more extreme forms of toxic leadership.

Recommendations: A Call for New Policies

With the trust the American public places in the military and the potential deleterious impacts of toxic leadership upon Airmen, it is incumbent upon the Air Force to create emboldened officer personnel policies that identify and eliminate toxic senior leaders. Such policies require a cultural shift and new thought in the Air Force's officer recruitment, promotion, and command selection processes. Because toxic leadership may appear at different stages of an officer's tenure, policy must dictate iterative identification cycles throughout the

officer's career. At a minimum, the Air Force needs to develop and implement policies that: 1) prevent a toxic leader from entering the officer ranks, 2) if on-boarded, deny identified toxic leaders further advancement, and 3) implement an aggressive emotional intelligence education and training program to counter toxicity.

There is a caveat. Even if the Air Force has the means to identify and eliminate toxic leaders, the policy will lack efficacy if not enforced. "Toxic personalities exist in organizations because people tolerate them, change to accommodate them, or protect them."[71] Morgan McCall believes many superiors reinforce toxic leaders by "rewarding them for their flaws, teaching them to behave in ineffective ways, reinforcing narrow perspectives and skills, and inflating their egos."[72] Such conduct in itself is toxic and certainly self-serving despite any short term gains these behaviors might bring to an organization. Thus, policy shifts begin with both the Secretary and Chief of Staff of the Air Force demanding a zero-tolerance stance against toxic leadership.

Because of the intrinsic nexus between narcissism and toxic leadership, psychological testing for the identification of destructive narcissistic behaviors must form the cornerstone for eliminating toxic leaders. While Air Force policy has strict and well-defined standards for physical fitness including iterative testing, it pays little attention to assessing the mental fitness of future or current officers via psychological testing within its officer general population.

There is precedence for use of psychological testing in the military services. U.S. special operations forces use such testing (including for narcissism) as part of its recruitment and selection process. Obviously, the more pathological forms of narcissism are undesirable traits for special operators since they must have a "level of flexibility in adapting to changing or unexpected challenges . . . [and an] ability to manage sensitive interpersonal situations."[73] Like special operators, one can argue that senior officers in today's VUCA environment also function

under very demanding and stressful conditions that warrant psychological testing to help assess their mental (and even moral) fitness.[74]

Policy should specify that psychological testing for destructive narcissism will initially occur when an officer is in a pre-accessioning status, most notably before enrollment as a cadet in the Air Force Academy or before contracting as a cadet in the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFROTC). In addition, enlisted Airmen enrolling in Officer Training School (OTS) and those receiving direct commissions require psychological testing. Based upon test results and analysis by a clinical psychologist, if there are clear indications that the officer candidate has pathological narcissism (i.e., clinical NPD), the Air Force should not access that candidate. If there is no evidence of NPD, the clinical psychologist, based upon the dimensional nature of narcissism, must advise Air Force recruitment and selection personnel on the officer candidate's level of subclinical narcissism and his or her potential for toxicity.

Initial screening is just the beginning—the key is to ensure toxicity never reaches to the senior level. Since [leaders] "are all too quick to deny the pressures that come with leadership can contribute to dysfunctional behavior and decisions,"[75] there is a need to consistently reassess that leader's level of narcissism and toxicity as he or she advances in rank and holds key positions. As a result, policy must advocate that testing be iterative throughout an officer's career and that results be a part of the officer's official military record. Key gates for psychological retesting should include assignment to company and above commands as well as promotions to field grade and general officer ranks. Iterative testing is also important since "it is difficult for toxic leaders to succeed in organizations with effective forms of governance that include appropriate checks and balances on the behavior of the leader."[76] Additionally, policy should ensure that psychological assessments will be one of several components used for toxicity

screening since it is critical that users of the data view the results "within the context of other available information."[77] Lastly, formal iterative gates do not negate the responsibility to actively recognize toxic behaviors and take immediate corrective action.

The Minnesota Multifactor Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) is the professional's choice and is regarded as the world's foremost psychometric instrument for measuring adult psychopathology.[78] Many government organizations use the MMPI-2 to select candidates to fill high risk and stressful positions.[79] U.S. military special operations forces use the MMPI-2 as the primary psychological testing tool for screening potential candidates.[80] [81] The MMPI-2 has 567 true-false questions and takes 60-90 minutes to complete. It has numerous scales for evaluating virtually all components of narcissism.[82] A modified version of the MMPI-2 is the MMPI-2-RF (Restructured Form), containing 338 questions and taking less than an hour to complete.[83] Both tests have significant validity, with numerous measures built in to prevent "faking."[84]

Through the use of the MMPI-2, the Air Force can build a psychological testing program for the general officer population by capitalizing on well-established methodologies employed by the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), and particularly, the Air Force component of that combatant command. To round out and balance the MMPI-2, policy should stipulate the use of auxiliary assessment tools to include the 360-degree Multi-Source Assessment Feedback (MSAF) and command climate surveys.

The 360 MSAF allows superiors, peers, and subordinates to assess an officer's behavior that may demonstrate destructive narcissistic tendencies and toxicity. Currently, the officer selects who rates him or her and only the rated officer receives the results. Thus, it is contingent upon the individual officer to take action (or not) to correct any toxic trends. U.S. Army policy

now makes a 360 MSAF mandatory for all its officers once every three years.[85] However, the Air Force allows for voluntary use of the 360 MSAF.

At present, all the services use the 360 MSAF as a developmental, not evaluative tool. In fact, the services have long refused to implement mandatory 360 degree feedback into official performance evaluations.[86] Most of the reluctance stems from the belief that subordinates, in particular, may not possess the appropriate lens for making effective assessments; however, "they can relate whether they are being tormented by leaders who are inflexible, disrespectful, seek personal gain above shared gain, act unethically, or rely heavily on fear and intimidation."[87] Although feedback may reflect the opinions of disgruntled followers versus legitimate issues of toxicity, a sufficient sample size allowing for distinguishable standards of deviation will negate these aberrations.[88] Regardless, "to help instill core values in airmen and strive for continuous improvement in adhering to them, the Air Force needs to expand its performance feedback program to include [mandatory] 360-degree feedback."[89]

To combat leader toxicity, there are four key policy areas for successful 360 MSAF implementation in the Air Force. First, the service must mandate that any officer serving in command positions receive a 360 MSAF annually. All other officers should receive a mandatory assessment every three years. Second, there must be random selection of participants for the 360 MSAF in order for the officer to avoid "gaming" the results by picking favorites. As demonstrated earlier, this is particularly important at the senior levels where there is greater homogeneity in thought and deed. Third, 360 MSAF results require review both by the officer and an independent panel. If results indicate toxic trends, policy must allow for elimination options.[90] Lastly, policy must stipulate that 360 MSAF results require official notation in the

Officer Performance Report (OPR). This is essential to identify trends in an officer's proclivity for destructive narcissistic and toxic behaviors during promotion and command boards.

The command climate survey serves as another multi-rater assessment tool and complements both the MMPI-2 and 360 MSAF. Current incarnations of command climate surveys do not directly focus on pinpointing noxious behaviors, with some participants calling for specific data elements to target a toxic leadership issue.[91] Thus, Air Force policy must specify the development of a command climate survey that accounts for toxic behaviors to elicit effective feedback on officer conduct. Furthermore, policy needs to direct that all officers serving in command positions be subject to a command climate survey annually during their tenure and that an independent panel reviews the results. Similar to the 360 MSAF, toxic results may require elimination of the officer. In addition, results of command climate surveys need to become part of the officer's official file for consideration in future promotion and command boards.

As discussed above, policy should dictate that these assessments require review by a qualified panel to determine if the officer demonstrates toxicity and requires elimination. In addition to senior commanders, panel membership should include a clinical psychologist as an advisor. Coordination with Judge Advocate General and Inspector General advisors will be necessary to ensure due process and validation of board results. A similar requirement will be crucial for senior officer promotion and command boards. Also, officers competing for command positions should undergo structured interviews as part of the validation process and to have an opportunity to refute any positive indications of toxicity. Thus, managing toxicity requires greater overhead, including a more personalized screening and validation methodology. Without doubt," high toxicity leadership presents a complex challenge for management."[92]

However, not enacting more draconian actions can result in significant discredit to the Air Force as a trusted institution, particularly since toxicity tends to occur more at senior levels of leadership where there can be significant strategic impacts (e.g., increased Congressional oversight on the service and its programs).

A proactive measure to eliminate or reduce toxic leaders is to implement an effective emotional intelligence education and training program in the Air Force. Emotional intelligence is a formidable tool to help an officer counter destructive narcissistic and toxic predispositions and initiate self-corrective actions. Emotional intelligence provides a means to understand what factors drive dysfunctional behavior and to "prepare an intervention to affect these underlying factors."[93] Specifically, according to Goleman, emotional intelligence "is the ability to manage ourselves and our relationships effectively" and consists of four capabilities described as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social skill.[94] Key components that make up these capabilities include: self-control, conscientiousness, trust worthiness, empathy, service-orientation, conflict management, teamwork, and collaboration.[95] Thus, it becomes obvious that emotional intelligence is the antithesis of destructive narcissism and toxic leadership, suggesting it may have the potential to neutralize their lethality.

Psychological testing may not reveal all narcissistic behaviors or those that are dormant. In particular, once a senior leader has reached a pinnacle of success, it is possible that these dark side behaviors will manifest themselves (e.g., via the Bathsheba Syndrome or VUCA environment stresses). Imbued with a sense of emotional intelligence, a leader can help temper these sinister allurements by recognizing his or her leanings toward toxicity. In short, Kets de Vries admonishes senior leaders that they "must mute the narcissistic sirens . . . and develop a sense of emotional intelligence."[96]

However, Maccoby reports that destructive narcissistic leaders do not seek self-introspection, prefer controlling others as compared to "knowing and disciplining themselves," and have little interest in delving into their own personalities.[97] This means it may be difficult or even impossible for a strongly infected leader to appreciate the benefits of emotional intelligence. Because destructive narcissists will have a strong sense of self-denial, it is imperative that this education occur early and routinely throughout the officer's career to provide the best chances of self-identification and self-rehabilitation.

Constructive narcissists also have a need to consciously employ emotional intelligence since any senior leader may have "a lack of conscious awareness". . . [of toxic] behaviors [that] become so routine they are performed almost automatically—without self-awareness."[98] Even for the most consummate senior officers, complex strategic environments require expert use of emotional intelligence where there is a great need to establish and maintain effective relationships.[99] Emotional intelligence can help manage stress associated with the VUCA environment and assuage destructive narcissistic behaviors, thereby increasing positive relationships.

Air Force policy needs to fully embrace the indoctrination of emotional intelligence among its officer corps. Policy should emphasize the need for emotional intelligence education and training to occur throughout the officer's career beginning with exposure to Air Force Academy cadets, AFROTC cadets, and OTS and direct commission candidates. Upon commissioning, other venues would include officer technical school environments under the Air Education and Training Command (AETC) umbrella. In addition, repeated applications of emotional training and education should occur in such milieus as Squadron Officer School (SOS) and Commissioned Officer Training (COT). Capstone indoctrination should be part of

professional military education (PME), namely within the Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) and the Air War College (AWC).

Conclusion

Most Air Force senior officers possess constructive narcissistic behaviors and serve with utmost professionalism, embracing the service's core values of *Integrity, Service before Self, and Excellence*. However, there is a dysfunctional minority who has allowed destructive narcissistic behaviors to inject toxicity into their leadership style, thereby challenging the Air Force's core values, wreaking havoc among the Airmen under their care, and threatening public trust in the institution.

Considering both the dimensional and fungible nature of narcissism and toxic leadership, one can understand that greater levels of destructive narcissism most likely translate into higher degrees of malevolent toxicity. Compounded with environmental pressures, destructive narcissism serves as a catalyst for toxicity among this minority, creating potential for strategic calamity. Toxic leadership is probably not a new phenomenon; in fact, most likely it has existed since the founding of the Air Force. Regardless, the Air Force can no longer turn a blind eye to these toxic leaders because of the short term effectiveness they offer.

The recommendations in this paper are purposefully provocative. Eradication of toxic leaders requires the Air Force to uncover skeletons in its closet and to question the status quo. These recommendations create a framework for reassessing Air Force officer recruitment, promotion and command selection policies in respect to targeting toxic leaders and eliminating them from the ranks. Psychological testing, 360 MSAF, and command climate surveys can play an important role in eliminating leader toxicity when used at the right time and place in an

officer's career. A constructive narcissist need not fear the results of these assessments nor their notation in official records−the truth will speak for itself. And of course, the myriad of benefits offered by emotional intelligence education and training will pay substantial future dividends.

Toxic leadership is an anathema to the Air Force. The service must make a concentrated effort to eliminate toxicity in order to ensure only the most professional senior officers lead Airmen. The Air Force has the means to combat this pariah through the implementation and enforcement of new policy. In doing so, the Air Force will demonstrate by deed its eagerness to uphold its core values and to honor the Airmen that selflessly serve, sustain its relevancy, and maintain its position of trust among the American people.

Notes

[1]Seth.A Rosenthal, *National Leadership Index 2012: A National Study of Confidence in Leadership*, Harvard Kennedy School Center for Public Leadership, Harvard University, 2012.

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[3]Gen Michael T. Ryan, "Reflections on Core Values," in AU-*24 Concepts for Air Force Leadership*, ed. Richard L. Lester (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, August 2008), 53.

[4]Dean C. Ludwig and Clinton D. Longenecker, "The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 12 (1993): 268-269.

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